



A reflection on the use of case studies as a methodology for social learning research in sub Saharan Africa

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ABSTRACT

A recent review has highlighted that the methodology most commonly employed to research social learning has been the individual case study. We draw on four examples of social learning research in the environmental and sustainability sciences from sub-Saharan Africa to reflect on possible reasons behind the preponderance of case study research in this field, and to identify common elements that may be significant for social learning research more generally. We find that a common interest in change oriented social learning, and therefore processes of change, makes case studies a necessary approach because long term process analyses are required that are sensitive to social-ecological contexts. Common elements of the examples reflected upon included: a focus on initiating, tracking and/or understanding a process of change toward sustainability; long term research; an action research agenda that involves reflecting on data with research participants; and temporal, process based analysis of data coupled with in-depth theoretical analysis. This paper highlights that there is significant scope for exploratory research that compares case studies of social learning research to generate a deeper understanding of social learning processes, and their relationship to human agency and societal change.

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1. Introduction

Learning is necessary for the adaptations and transformations that will be required to deal with growing social-ecological change at multiple scales [1,2]. Such learning will involve deep changes in understanding about the inter-relationships between people and their environmental systems. These changes in understanding must go beyond small groups of people in specific contexts, and become located within society as a whole [3]. The dual nature of this learning, which emerges in local places, but which must be reflected at global scales has led to a growing interest in social theories of learning. The term ‘social learning’ is a new descriptor signifying an interest in the sociological expansion and uptake of learning processes in wider societal contexts [4,5]. Reed *et al.* [5: r1] define social learning as “a change in understanding that goes beyond the individual to become situated within wider social units or communities of practice through social interactions between actors within social

networks”. Thus, for learning to be referred to as social learning it must move beyond individuals and become situated in wider social units. At focus are forms of societal learning that are change oriented, since learning is considered to have a role to play in building human capacities to adapt to changing social-ecological conditions [6]. This emphasis on broader societal learning and change are two of the key characteristics of social learning that are supporting the growing interest in the concept in the environmental and sustainability sciences.

Social learning has thus emerged as a new arena of theoretical development and practical application within the wider landscape of both learning theory (with its roots in behavioural and cognitive psychology, and educational theory), and social-ecological management and governance (with its roots in social-ecological systems, collective governance and management theory). Specifically, growing interest in social learning theory can be found within a wide range of disciplines and sub-fields focused on sustainability, including environmental education [see 7 for a review], participatory governance studies [see 8 for a review], and natural resource management [see 9,10,11 for reviews]. A recent compilation of reviews [12] tracing the emergence of an interest in change oriented social learning in each of these bodies of literature, discussed below, has highlighted some interesting features, particularly the

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coupling of social learning theory and a change oriented interest in learning and practice; and the associated ways in which social learning is and can be researched. We begin by reflecting on the features of social learning research in some of these disciplines, before reflecting on the methodological choices that tend to cut across these.

A review of the emergence of social learning research in the cognitive and behavioural sciences (psychology and education) shows dissatisfaction with narrow theories of learning that focused on individual behaviour change and/or individual cognition [7]. In this literature, theories of social learning emerged from early engagement with the processes of meaning making in social and cultural contexts [13,14], which imply and indeed require participation in the meaning making process. Vygotsky, in fact, restructured the psychological research object to focus on processes of meaning making [15]. Examples are action competence approaches to learning and change [16]; expansive learning approaches [17–20]; and a theorizing of broader reflexive social learning processes tracking the manner in which diversity and dissonance in sustainability issues shapes collaborative learning and change [3,21]. These developments lead to an understanding that social learning is, or can be, a process of change towards sustainability, or that sustainability is a process of learning. In the participatory democracy literature, on the other hand, social learning can be traced to an interest in participation in decision making, and the need for recognition of equity in decision making processes. Habermasian theories of communicative action [22] have been particularly influential in shaping notions of participation and learning in decision making. More recently Sen's [23] concepts of negotiated capabilities (involving participation in decision making about valued beings and doings in context) have influenced understandings of how social learning processes can be constituted in social contexts [8].

A different set of conditions influenced the growing interest in social learning in natural resource management [see 24 for a review]. Here, the interest in change oriented learning emerged largely out of practice in the 1980's. On the one hand, top-down management processes based on linear thinking repeatedly failed due largely to flawed conceptions of ecosystems undergoing gradual, predictable change that could be engineered by managers [25] and led to calls for learning based approaches such as adaptive management [26,27]. The term social learning was first used in the collaborative management literature [28] to refer to a process in which parties learn to work collaboratively. Later Pinkerton [29], influenced by Habermas's communicative rationality, described social learning as a process that involves parties deliberating over problems, undertaking shared tasks, revealing values and perceptions, and conducting joint monitoring. Similarly grounded in deliberative theory, Daniels and Walker [30] described social learning as the process of framing issues, analyzing alternatives, and debating choices as part of an inclusive deliberative process. Over time, social learning became increasingly associated in this literature with the capacity for collective action, problem solving, conflict mitigation and relationship building [31–33]. This focus on learning taking place through dialogue, debate and experiments underpins an understanding of social learning in natural resource management as a process that expands understanding of human-environment interactions [32].

A recent review of methodologies employed to research social learning in natural resource management found that by far the methodology most frequently used has been the individual case study [11]. Indeed, the case study appears to be the most widely used empirical methodology for social learning research across all bodies of literature reviewed (education, participatory democracy and natural resource management). The ways in which we research learning are important for the way in which knowledge of social learning theory and praxis is being developed within

the sustainability sciences. The case study method refers to an empirical enquiry that investigates a phenomenon in-depth and in context, and is considered most appropriate where the boundaries between the phenomenon under investigation and the context are unclear [34]. One of the most common critiques of case study research, however, is that it is not possible to generalize findings for application in other sites. However, developments in case study research are indicating various possibilities for generalization, including what Bassey [35] refers to as 'fuzzy generalization' in which generalizations can be made, but always with a recognition of their potential fallibility when transferred to other contexts. This recognition of the fallibility of extrinsic generalizations is, according to Flyvbjerg [36] and Sayer [37,38] the norm for any research design that works with social (and by implication social-ecological) research objects, and is therefore not a 'problem' per se, but rather a reality of this kind of research. There is growing recognition that it is possible to generalize from case study designs, not at the level of empirical experience, but at the level of the underlying generative mechanisms that support empirical observations [38,39].

In this paper we draw on four independent examples of empirical research into social learning for sustainable environmental management and adaptation in sub-Saharan Africa. All of the examples used the case study method. Taken together, the case studies contribute insights that expand upon Reed *et al.*'s [5] definition of 'what' social learning is by focussing on 'how' social learning emerges or can be facilitated in specific contexts in a way that supports action. In so doing, the authors are careful to avoid confusing descriptions of participatory processes with observations of social learning by describing as social learning only those outcomes that meet Reed *et al.*'s criteria (i.e. a change in understanding that occurs through social interactions and goes beyond individuals). We reflect on the methodological choices made by researchers, and the questions guiding social learning research from within different disciplinary domains. Each approach offers a different vantage point from which to view the system in question, and different opportunities to understand social learning processes and their associated outcomes. We begin by presenting the four examples of social learning research. We use these examples to reflect on possible reasons behind the identified trend toward case study research methodologies in social learning research. We also identify common elements from the examples that may be significant for social learning research in the region and beyond, and on aspects that might be unique to the geographical context of sub-Saharan Africa.

2. Examples of social learning research

Four examples of social learning research are presented in this section. The examples were selected because they all employed the case study method, and because the authors were involved either as the lead researchers (GC, MM, MB & IK) or in a supervisory role (HL, SS) in each of them. The examples were also selected because two of them (examples 1 & 2) were conducted by researchers located within the environmental education discipline and focussed on process-oriented questions of how social learning emerges in socio-cultural contexts, and two (examples 3 & 4) were conducted by researchers who come from an environmental science and participatory development background and focussed on outcome questions related to how one might monitor and evaluate the extent to which social learning has taken place and is leading to action. These different approaches reveal some noteworthy differences in emphasis in social learning research in distinct disciplinary domains. Table 1 presents some of the significant axes of difference and similarity between the examples, and these are reflected upon in the discussion.

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